No. 39

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

She was seated on the arm of the comfortable chair her lover occupied. As she lit a match and held it to the cigarette between his lips, she said: "I am afraid your life is in danger, dear."

R. of M. G., No. 39.

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IT WAS NOT often that Philip Gordon let his anger get the best of him to the extent of using harsh language to a woman. But he felt that the time had come when he must express himself in plain terms to his wife.

He gave her a long glance as he said in a tone of cold fury:

"What is the use of trying to awaken a nobler feeling in you. You are no better than a common woman of the streets. You are not fit to be even a truck driver's wife."

The last remark aroused the devil in Alice.

With a hissing sound and a muttered oath she shot forward and struck her husband a stinging blow in the face.

He staggered for a moment, then regained his balance. But he did not strike back. Instead his face became illuminated by a patient smile.

"That was another act well worthy of you, Alice," he told her. "And now, that we seem to have come to the parting of the ways, I will give you a bit of information I withheld from you because I did not want to hurt you. You better prepare for a shock."

"What — what is it?" she gasped as Phil grew silent for a moment.

"Simply this, my dear," answered he. "From various sources has come incontrovertible evidence that my first wife is still alive."

"What?" Alice was staggered by the news.

"Yes," Phil continued coolly, "Marie was not killed in that explosion at Gary. Neither was she buried. What became of her, I don't know. But what I do know is that she is not dead and that no doubt she is living somewhere under an assumed name."

Chilly paralysis crept into the woman's nerves

She glared at her husband, and it was the smile of triumph on his handsome features that stung her to speech.

"If you are so sure about that, why don't you find her?" she cried.

"That is exactly what I have been trying to do," said Phil.

"I hope you succeed," came back sneeringly.

"You don't seem to realize what a frightful position such an event would place you in, Alice. The divorce proceedings I had instituted against my first wife were halted when I learned of the Gary catastrophe. You are——"

Alice broke in vehemently:

"What difference should that make? You and I have been husband and wife in name only. There never was any love between us."

"Part of what you say is true, and the other part convicts you of being a greater fool than I thought," replied her husband. "If I did not love you like a husband should, that was your own fault alone. I have not forgotten what you tried to do to my boy.

"He would not be alive to-day if it had not been for Miss Desmond's loving care. And what did you do with your own child? You practically killed it, although this same Miss Desmond tried to save it."

An ugly gleam came into Alice's eyes.

"Please don't mention that woman's name again!" she screamed. "I hate her as much as I hate you."

He inclined his head.

"Then there is nothing more to be said between us," he declared in a tone of resignment. "Of course, I shall expect you to leave my house."

"You bet I will!" she assented readily.

"And," Phil spoke almost gently, "please spare your old father the misery of allowing him to find out

why you are leaving. That is the least you can do. He must never know why you and I separated."

When Alice did not give him the answer he expected, he took a hold of her arm and forced her to meet his gaze.

"You'll spare him, won't you?" he begged. "And I'll promise you that I shall in no way interfere with your future movements. You can go where you please, do what you please, and I'll make a suitable settlement upon you. That is fair enough, isn't it?"

For the first time since their stormy interview began, Alice showed emotion.

"Yes, that is fair enough," she said in a whisper.

"Alright." He drew out his wallet and extracted a number of bills from it. "Here, take this. Through my banker you can draw to the amount of five hundred dollars each month, which ought to keep you in comfort at least."

"Then — then you expect to divorce me?" she asked in a breath as she took the money.

"Not at present," said Phil. "I don't want to create another scandal through which your father would suffer most. The best thing is for you to leave Oak Manor quietly, and I wish you'd do that before morning. I'll take care of everything else."

A sudden trembling seized the woman.

The man speaking now was the one she had once loved so passionately. Something within her rebelled, but she set her teeth.

"Very well—Phil," she whispered. "Then this is goodby."

"Yes."

As she passed him in leaving the pavilion, she held out her hand. Perhaps he did not see it in the semi-darkness; perhaps he did. But he did not take it.

And his refusal brought back every evil impulse to the woman he had discarded.

Again hatred flamed up in her. And the hatred included Miss Desmond the lovely governess. Had those two met as Alice walked toward the house with rapid steps, there would have been murder done.

When Alice finally arrived in her boudoir she stood for a long time staring into space. There was a smoldering fire in her eyes.

Since she had to leave Oak Manor she was anxious to be gone. She steadfastly refused to realize her frightful mistake and the equally frightful punishment still waiting for her.

Chapter 127

THE RUM SMUGGLER

RUTH GORDON, or rather Mrs. Allan Bingham, the name acquired through her marriage to the young English naval officer, made the most serious mistake of her life when she eloped with Captain Le Mans, a supposed attache of the French diplomatic corps in London.

In doing so she burned all bridges behind her. At first, the idea of falling in love with the Frenchman had never occurred to her.

But slowly, and by degrees, the woman in her responded.

Captain Le Mans was always kind and considerate, and he granted her every whim with a smile. And when she finally fell in love with him, she loved him with all the fire and passion of her young soul.

But disappointments were not long in coming. She found out soon after their arrival in Paris that Le Mans was no longer an officer in the French navy.

Neither had he any connection with the French government. And the theft of Allan Bingham's formula was not committed in the interest of that government.

Le Mans had coveted its possession because of his insatiable desire for wealth.

He had cunningly devised a plan to hoodwink English diplomats, and got away with it, secretly aided by a close friend, high in Downing Street officialdom.

The newspaper article which threw a scare into the English naval board had been inspired by Ruth, her motive being revenge. She knew what the consequences

would be, and she was not mistaken.

How Allan Bingham was ordered to appear before the board of naval construction and publicly disgraced, was told in a preceding chapter.

Yes, she had indeed suceeded in paying the Binghams back for the slights and snubs they had heaped upon Allan's American wife.

Nothing had ever been mentioned about marriage between Captain Le Mans and Ruth. They loved each other, and nothing else mattered.

And even had the Frenchman been disposed to make the lovely American his wife—which he was not—existing conditions made it impossible because Ruth was still the bona fide Mrs. Allan Bingham.

Captain Le Mans was far too shrewd to offer the stolen formula for a high explosive to his own government. This would at once have brought about his own undoing. But there was Germany, England's old and bitter enemy.

Germany, fast recuperating from the effects of the world war, would begin the construction of a new navy. On this remote possibility Captain Le Mans built his hope.

Accompanied by Ruth he traveled to Berlin, where he met with an unexpected and flat turn-down.

Chagrined and disappointed, he tried his luck with Austria. Again he was unsuccessful. The Spanish government refused to consider dealing for the formula, which about killed every hope the Frenchman had.

By this time his money was giving out. It was a very expensive proposition to travel from one European country to another accompanied by a lovely young woman.

But whatever Captain Le Mans' shortcomings were, he was a game sport and a good loser.

Finally he sold the formula to a private corporation in Paris for a moderate sum and retired to a small villa some distance from the city.

Ruth had gotten over her disappointment of not finding Captain Le Mans what he had claimed to be in London. What difference did it make after all? Was he not a perfect lover?

But as all good things must come to an end, so did their finances dwindle down until there was cause for worry.

In casting about for a new source of income, Captain Le Mans became acquainted with a group of men who systematically shipped champaigne and whiskey to America in open violation of the Prohibition law in effect there.

Le Mans at once showed keen interest as a certain proposition was presented to him. He had been the commander of a French cruiser during the late war and he was thoroughly conversant with the duties of a seaman.

But when he heard that the steamer he was to take charge of delivered its cargo to a secret spot along the English coast instead of directly to New York, he demurred.

"Why is that necessary?" he wanted to know. "Why not sail straight for the American shore?"

Then they explained to him that this was done in order to hoodwink the American government.

"You see," they told him, "we can not afford to get into a controversy with America. So we ship the wine under the British flag. If anything happens and the ship is held up, let the English do the explaining."

Captain Le Mans grinned sardonically. He understood.

"Very well, gentlemen," he said. "You can count on me."

"But there is one thing we insist on," came from his future employer. "The ship you are to command must not carry any passengers, and least of all women."

To this Le Mans agreed at once.

The following night he made his first trip across the English channel. His instructions were that he was to meet a British ship lying at anchor in Cardigan Bay, north of Wales. Here the transferring of the cargo of French champaigne and whiskey was made under the cover of darkness.

The salary attached to Captain Le Mans' new venture was very liberal, and he pocketed the money for his first trip with a smile of satisfaction.

But after making a few trips trouble began to brew. The English government, through secret informers, learned what was going on and determined to put a stop to the practise.

England refused to get into conflict with America because some French wine manufacturer saw fit to hide behind her flag.

Two small cruisers were ordered to patrol Cardigan Bay every night and look for the wine smugglers.

Their first attempt to capture the large ship that stole like a phantom across the English channel proved a failure because it was armed with a number of heavy caliber guns.

The small cruiser had to flee to avoid being sunk.

This affair caused a sensation. And consternation reigned when it was found out that Captain Le Mans commanded the wine smuggler.

Again the latter's connection with the Binghams was discussed, and of course, Allan Bingham got to hear about it.

Since his public disgrace by the naval construction board, he had led a secluded life. All of his former

friends and comrades had forsaken him.

But when he heard Captain Le Mans' name mentioned, his anger flamed up anew. Again his heart ached for a chance to vindicate himself in the eyes of his government.

He called at the office of the highest naval officer and begged for a chance. The refusal was almost insulting. With tears in his eyes he went home and wept on the shoulders of his sorrowing mother.

"Don't take it too much to heart, my boy," she soothed tenderly. "Your chance will come."

"Oh, I hope it will come soon," Allan sobbed. "I can't stand this thing much longer. All London is again talking about that cursed Frenchmen and myself."

Then Lady Bingham paid a visit to naval headquarters and made a touching plea for her son without the latter's knowledge. But she was given no promise and she returned home unhappier than she had ever been in all her life.

She bitterly regretted her treatment of her son's American wife. Remorse tortured her incessantly, and she could not think of Captain Le Mans without a feeling of hate.

Her son had been branded a traitor.

He had been disgraced and now that England was again in need of experienced naval officers, her only son was denied the privilege to serve in order that he might fight for his vindication.

"They must take me," the unhappy young man cried, as he raced up and down in his room, his hands clenched and his jaw set. "They must, and by God, I'll make them."

That same afternoon he paid another visit to naval headquarters in Downing Street. And he went with the determination to be accepted.

Admiral Benson, the officer in charge, received him with that cold smile which seemed to say:

"Well, here again, you traitor."

"I want to serve my country," Bingham began manfully.

The old admiral shook his head.

"You were previously rejected because of your record," he answered frigidly. "I am sorry."

"But you must take me," the former lieutenant persisted. "I was condemned without a fair trial. I have a personal account to settle with Captain Le Mans and——"

"You made that same statement before," Admiral Benson cut him short. "This is not the time to settle personal grievances. I suppose you want to punish him for running off with your wife. You should have done that long before."

The silence which followed was painful in the extreme.

Bingham's jaw worked visibly. This was the first time any allusion had been made to Ruth's sudden disappearance with Le Mans.

He resented it hotly and was about to make an angry retort but upon second thought he changed his mind.

The old admiral was watching him keenly, as if to guage the effect of his words. He smiled a little, and it was not an altogether unpleasant smile.

"I need not tell you that you have lost the confidence of every officer formerly associated with you," he said slowly. "Of course, that was to be expected since you showed such a marked preferrence toward a nation that is not very friendly toward us."

The young Earl rose to his full height, his eyes flaming and his face very white.

"I swear to you upon my hope of heaven that I never willfully did a single thing to the detriment of my country," he cried. "I have been accused of selling my formula to Le Mans. That is untrue. I would rather have cut my throat than——"

'Well, I am inclined to believe you, my friend," Admiral Benson interrupted mildly. "Personally I favor your return to the navy, but some of my colleagues are opposed to it."

"You are in absolute charge, sir," Allan went on, somewhat encouraged. "Won't you give me a chance to prove that I am a loyal Englishman to the core? All I ask is a chance."

The admiral looked sharply at the pleading man. He saw that his eyes were filled with tears.

"What chance do you want, Bingham?" he inquired, relenting apparently.

"Any kind of a chance, sir," came back quickly.

Again Admiral Benson viewed the speaker critically.

It became evident that he had been strangely and very favorably impressed with Bingham's speech and manner.

"I am begging for a chance for two reasons," the latter continued. "First of all I want to do my bit for dear old England. Second, something tells me that I shall meet Captain Le Mans. And that day will be the happiest of my life. I won't kill him. Death would be too good for him.

"But I'll take him prisoner and bring him back. and I'll make him clear my name. He is the only man on earth who can do it. I have been gathering some information and I know that Le Mans is in command of the French wine smuggler."

Admiral Benson looked surprised.

"Where did you get that information?" he asked, somewhat excitedly.

"You'll pardon me if I refuse to divulge its source, sir," was the response, "but I am positive of its authentity."

A long moment of silence followed.

The old admiral had taken his lead pencil and he was drawing all sorts of figures on a blank sheet of paper.

"Damn it," he cried, springing up, "I will give you a chance, Bingham."

The latter, overwhelmed by the sudden turn in his favor, could not restrain himself any longer. He fell into a chair and wept like a child.

While he sat thus, Admiral Benson slipped through a door, and returned a few seconds later with three staff officers.

He pointed at young Bingham, who still sat there, his face hidden in his hands and sobbing.

For quite a while the four naval officers gazed at the young earl in silence. That they were all affected was very evident.

When Bingham looked up and saw these officers, and recognized two of them as his former comrades, he gave a cry of joy.

Words were inadequate at that moment. Like a boy presented with a new and expensive toy, young Bingham rushed forward and embraced one after the other.

And while he did so, he allowed his tears to flow without attempting to restrain them.

If there remained the least shadow of doubt in the minds of the men present, it was speedily dispelled. And the former naval lieutenant was not taken back into the fold in a half-hearted manner.

After the touching scene was over, they sat down to discuss the future of Allan Bingham.

"If you can see your way clear, gentlemen," he said in response to a question. "I would like to be put on a first-line cruiser or battleship.

"It may sound like a foolish boast, gentlemen. Yet, I shall capture the French wine smuggler and bring her commander in as my prisoner. If I am not successful in this, my grave will be the North Sea."

The naval officers looked at one another.

Admiral Benson conferred with the man to his right in a low voice for a minute, then both nodded in mutual agreement.

"Bingham," the man in charge said soberly, "you shall have your chance at the French wine smuggler.

"We have a new scout cruiser just placed in commission. The 'Dover' is one of the finest ships of her class. We will put you in command of her, and if you sink the rum runner and capture Captain Le Mans, you will be promoted to a captaincy.

"I'll see to it that your commission is restored to you at once. Now return to your home and hold yourself in readiness. We may call you any hour. I wish you luck."

The young earl stood erect and saluted.

"I thank you, and I will not fail," he said, his voice husky with emotion.

When he left the office he was treading on air. He could hardly wait until he got home to tell the good news to his mother.

Lady Bingham smiled happily as her boy related his experience. And although it might mean the sacrifice of his life, she did not hesitate for a second to encourage him.

"God be with you, Allan, dear," she said as she

folded him into her arms. "And you will restore the family honor we lost through my contemptible trickery. I know your father will rest easier in his grave when you can hold up your head again without being ashamed."

For a long while mother and son sat close together and talked.

When Allan finally rose to make the necessary preparations for his departure, he did so like a boy about to go to a sunday school picnic.

The following morning he received a special message from the navy department informing him that the 'Dover' was lying at anchor in the Thames, and that he was to take command of her at once.

With the message came the lieutenant's commission.

But Lieutenant Bingham little dreamed what a surprise was in store for him. Fate had already decreed that he should meet Captain Le Mans in battle. But he was to meet another person he never expected to see again.

And this person was his wife!

Chapter 128

A DESPERATE FIGHT

WHEN ALICE stole away from Oak Manor in the dead hours of the night, she did not feel particularly regretful. Her life as Phil Gordon's second wife had been a complete failure. And there was no longer any other reason why she should remain.

The tower did not require close watching because its prisoner was gone, and every possibility of her sister Betty ever returning to her father had been removed.

For obvious reasons Alice did not say goodby to her father before she left. In the first place she was anxious to keep the real cause of her sudden departure from him. Then she dreaded making explanations that were painful.

But the worst fear she had lay in the possibility that her father would fly into a rage and disinherit her if he learned of her disgraceful conduct with Harold Wayne.

So far as Phil was concerned, she had no cause for worry. He was not the man to reveal an ugly truth —if this truth involved his wife.

And he was too considerate of his father-in-law's feelings to reveal just why Alice left so suddenly.

No one in the house knew that its mistress had gone during the night, except Phil, who watched her from the window of his room. And so the next morning dawned serenely.

But as old John Procter rose and began to dress, he noticed a sealed envelope on the floor a few inches

from the door.

It had evidently been shoved under the door by someone who desired to send him a message in that manner. With trembling hands he picked up the envelope and broke the seal.

Adjusting his glasses he was surprised to read the following:

Dear Dad:

Just received a telegram from my old schoolmate Grace Marshall. She is seriously ill and has asked me to come at once. Please forgive me for not saying goodby to you. When I left you were so soundly asleep that I did not have the heart to awaken you. So I am doing the next best thing in putting goodby in writing.

How long I shall stay I can not say right now. But don't become impatient or worried if I don't return within a month. Now take good care of yourself, dad, while I am gone.

Your affectionate daughter

Alice.

John Procter read the message several times, and slowly shook his head. He more than suspected the real reason for his daughter's sudden departure.

"Well, so it has come at last," he muttered to himself. "I have been expecting it for a long time. And I can't blame poor Phil. God knows he played fair with her. Had she done the same with him, this thing would never have happened."

As if to make sure that Alice was really gone, he made a trip to her boudoir. Here all indications pointed

to the fact that its mistress no longer cared to occupy it.

The dresser drawer stood open, revealing empty spaces.

Here and there a few pieces of hastily discarded feminine wearing apparel littered the floor. And now convinced, the old gentleman turned away with a deep sigh.

As he came into the dining room he did not see his son-in-law seated in his usual place.

"Where is Mr. Gordon?" he inquired of the servants who waited on him.

"Mr. Gordon had his breakfast early this morning, and he left for New York, sir," came back. "He will be gone for several days."

John Procter's surprise was not entirely pleasant. This was the first time Phil had gone away without saying goodby to him, and it gave him new food for thought. He suspected instantly that his son-in-law's trip to New York had some connection with Alice's sudden departure.

That day Mr. Procter was a very lonely man. In fact he had been that for the last two weeks. Bob Harding, his son-in-law, had insisted upon going back to Chicago to live.

In this the young man had been moved partly by his spirit of independence and partly because he thought he had a better chance to get a trace of Betty.

Phil Gordon returned to Oak Manor the following day, which seemed to indicate that he had not gone to New York.

This was another surprise to John Procter and he pounced upon his son-in-law as soon as the latter entered the house.

"I want to see you, young man," he exclaimed. "Come with me into the library."

"Well, what is it, dad?" Phil asked with a patient smile as they were alone.

"What is the meaning of this?" the old gentleman demanded, turning Alice's note over to Phil. "Did you know that your wife was called away?"

Gordon glanced at the message a moment and handed it back. For a few seconds he did not speak because he dreaded the telling of a falsehood. Well, at any rate it would be a white lie.

"Yes," he answered finally. "I knew all about it, dad. Alice did receive a telegram from Grace Marshall and I prevailed upon her to go at once. I think a change of surroundings will do her good."

John Procter looked the speaker squarely in the eyes.

"Are you telling me the truth?" he asked.

"Of course—of course," was the response which came a trifle too readily. "Why should I lie to you?"

"No, you shouldn't, my boy," the other said with feeling. "You know that I have always backed you up in any controversy you had with your wife. Although Alice is my daughter, I believe in upholding——"

"That's alright, dad," Phil broke in smilingly. "Now don't you worry about a thing."

With a kindly pat on the old gentleman's shoulder, Gordon quitted the library and went upstairs to the nursery. The evening shades had just begun to gather, and Miss Desmond was playing with the children.

They received him with joyous shouts and in a moment Harry and Phyllis were in his arms.

Marie stood in the background with her hand folded across her breast. Ah, if she could share in the caresses this man bestowed upon the children.

But as always, she had to hold herself in check and keep on playing the stranger to her own loved ones.

"How are you, Miss Desmond?" he inquired as he put the children aside very gently.

"Quite well, sir," she replied in a low, quivering voice.

"I am glad," Phil murmured, his eyes resting on her lovely face. "By the way," he added after a rather long moment of embarrassing silence, "Mrs. Gordon has gone on an extended trip, and I wish you would assume the management of the household during her absence. Will you?"

When Marie did not give her assent immediately, Gordon continued in an apologetic tone:

"Perhaps I am asking too much of you, Miss Desmond. I know the children keep you busy. The reason I suggested this is that you have the respect of the servants. I know they would mind you without question."

"If you wish it, Mr. Gordon," she answered, pronouncing his name in almost a whisper, "I'll do the best I can."

"Thank you very much. You do not know what a relief this is to me." He uttered a laugh that sounded strangely carefree. "I am satisfied that the management of my house will be in good hands."

As he finished speaking he walked over and kissed both of the children, then left the room.

Feeling the need of some vigorous exercise and fresh air, he gave orders to have his horse saddled, and the next ten minutes found him cantering briskly down the winding lane which led to the country road.

Although the sun had disappeared in the west, it was still light enough to easily recognize those who passed him.

Most of the people he met were farmers on the way home or going to the village. He had a smile or a pleasant nod for all of them.

Philip Gordon seemed to have shaken off that feeling of mental depression and physical lethargy. New life spurred him. And not without reason. He was free —free, for the main cause of his domestic trouble was gone.

But a dark frown crossed his brow as he thought of the incident which had brought about his wife's sudden leaving.

She had deceived him with cold deliberation, for there was not the least doubt in his mind that Alice had willingly become Harold Wayne's mistress.

But his anger was mainly directed at the man who so brazenly invaded his own home. Only a moral degenerate was capable of such an act.

"The damned hound!" he muttered through his clenched teeth. "I should have given him the beating of his life, but I let him go without it. I suppose he will follow Alice no matter where she goes. Well, let them have their fling. They'll get what is coming to them."

But that did not express Gordon's sentiments entirely. He failed to mention the rage and the regret that constantly gnawed at his vitals.

Rage, because Wayne had broken his word. Regret, because Wayne remained unpunished.

Little did Phil suspect that fate had contrived to give him an opportunity to give vent to his wrath, for coming toward him, also astride a horse, was Harold Wayne.

They did not see each other until they almost collided. As if moved by the same impulse, both men dismounted.

'I was just thinking of you, Wayne," Gordon was first to speak. 'You know, the other night I did not get a chance to tell you what I think of you. I am glad I've got it now."

The other turned a shade paler.

"Neither did I get a chance to explain the situation," he replied. "No doubt you were under the impression that your wife and I——"

"My impression has always been that you are a damned skunk," Phil interrupted fiercely. "I had your pedigree long before you came to be a neighbor of mine. But you'll never tackle another married woman!"

The last word scarcely left the speaker's lips when his fist shot out. Wayne parried the blow and stepped back.

"Hold on a minute, Gordon!" he shouted. "What's the use of fighting out here on the road like a couple of barroom loafers? Cool off and let me tell you just what happened."

But Gordon's pent-up rage had broken out.

"You filthy hound!" he snarled. "Do you think I'd give you another chance to run away? Nor will you get a chance to hide behind a woman's skirts. Fight, damn you! Fight!"

Harold Wayne's anger had been slow to rise, but when it did, it flamed up suddenly.

"Alright, you fool!" he cried. "If you want it that way!"

The two men were evenly matched in size and strength, and the fight that began out there on that lonely country road under the gathering stars was terrific.

Blow after blow was struck and parried. Fierce epithets were hurled and returned.

It was the battle of two bitter enemies who knew that only one of them could be the victor. By degrees, however, Wayne was forced to give ground. Three times Gordon's wicked smash caught him on the jaw.

With his knees sagging, he fought back, a dry sob in his throat. Then he fell as another blow clipped him

on the side of the head.

But he was up again the next instant. Gordon, furious as a wild tiger, would not let up although he saw that his adversary was a beaten man.

"I am not half through with you yet!" he hissed through his swollen lips. "I'll put a mark on that face of yours that'll stay for life!"

Wayne's handsome face had always been one of his best assets when dealing with women. When Gordon threatened to put a mark on it, he knew very well what that meant.

He had heard of men beaten in a fight, lying on the ground helpless, suffering the frightful punishment of the heel.

But Gordon should never apply the heel to his face. But what little strength he had left must be conserved.

When he fell again he realized to his horror that he could not get up. His enemy was towering over him, grinning hideously. And then the worst seemed about to happen.

With a howl, Wayne reached for his hip pocket. Only one thought was in his whirling mind.

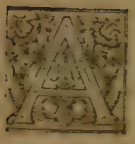
He must prevent Gordon from spoiling his good looks. He had no idea of killing. And when he shot, he aimed low—or at least he thought he did.

The crack of the automatic did not deter Gordon. On he came with but a single purpose. At the next shot he stopped suddenly.

"Damn you!" he growled, and fell heavily to the ground.

Chapter 129

IN DEEP WATER



THOUGH just twenty-one, Ruth Gordon, at that age, had passed through more experiences than most women do in a life time. From her earliest youth the reckless streak in her came to the surface every now and then. Her marriage to Guy Fillmore proved to be a failure. Her second venture into matrimony doomed her to greater disappointments.

But when she became Captain Le Mans' common-law wife, it was the beginning of the end of her colorful career.

The love she had borne her first husband was pure and true. She admired the young English naval officer and ambition prompted her to trap Allan Bingham into a proposal of marriage. But she never really loved him.

Ruth's sentiment toward the Frenchman called forth all the passion within her young soul. Captain Le Mans was her man, and she was willing to follow him to the end of the world.

There were moments when the very thought of giving him up made the cold shiver run up and down her spine.

She was never happy when separated from him. So when Captain Le Mans entered the employ of the French wine smugglers, she was compelled to spend quite a few days alone.

And then she began to fear for his life, for dangers beset her lover at every trip across the English channel

One evening as they were seated in their cozy living room, Ruth approached the matter which had now become her chief worry.

She was seated on the arm of the comfortable chair her lover occupied. As she lit a match and held it to the cigarette between his lips, she said:

"I am afraid your life is in danger, dear."

Captain Le Mans took a few puffs, then uttered a hearty laugh.

"What makes you think so, Ruth?" he asked.

"You have had several narrow escapes," she told him. "You told me yourself how near you came being caught by an English warship. I can't tell you how it worries me. Sooner or later you'll——"

Another laugh interrupted her. His tone was confident and even boisterous as he retorted:

"They'll never catch us, those slow-witted Britishers. We sunk one of the old tubs they sent out to capture my ship. But my dear child, you must remember that there can be no gain without risk. I am paid very liberally and in a year we'll have enough money to retire for life."

That was true, but it seemed extremely doubtful that Captain Le Mans would carry on his nefarious trade for a whole year.

A first-line British cruiser had been sent out to capture the French wine and rum smuggled, and Allan Bingham was its commander.

It seemed that Ruth had a premonition of what was to happen, for when her lover prepared to make another trip across the channel with a cargo of champaigne she begged Captain Le Mans to take her with him.

"I am sorry I can't dear," he told her, remember-in ghis agreement that he must not take passengers aboard his ship."

"Oh, please take me," she begged as she lay in his arms.

Le Mans shook his head.

"I wish I could, sweetheart," he answered amid passionate kisses. "But the rules are very strict. If I violate them, I'll lose my position, and then what will become of us?"

He could scarcely resist her sweet feminine wiles. He had not yet tired of her and she knew it. That was Ruth's triumph.

"You are going into grave danger, Lover mine," she sobbed. "What if something was to happen to you? I want to be at your side if the end should come. I am not afraid to die with you."

As she wound her soft arms around his neck she kissed him tenderly, but he put her from him.

"Don't tempt me, Ruth," he cried, weakening.

"I'll not be the least trouble to you, dearest," she whispered. "You can smuggle me aboard to-night and I'll stay in your cabin. No one will be any the wiser."

Captain Le Mans was debating with himself. He knew he would most likely lose his assignment if he broke the rule.

Yet, how pleasant it would be to have Ruth with him. And why not? She would not interfere with the discharge of his duties.

So far as the men under his command were concerned, he need have no fear. They could be relied upon to keep silent. While all these thoughts crossed his mind, his stern features relaxed and he nodded his consent.

"You'll take me?" she cried, overjoyed.

"Yes, dear," he answered in a low vibrating voice. "I'll take you because you wish it. After all, what matter the consequences? You are dearer to me than any other living thing on the face of the earth."

"Oh, I'll enjoy every minute of the trip," Ruth exclaimed. "I like plenty of excitement."

He laughed.

"You'll probably get plenty of it."

So they made their plans, and that night, under the cover of darkness, Ruth was smuggled aboard her lover's ship.

She went at once to his cabin where she made herself thoroughly at home.

Captain Le Mans had left the bridge and was on his way below.

At the door of his cabin he paused and glanced furtively about. Then he quicky drew a key from his pocket, unlocked the door and entered.

Ruth threw the magazine, she had been reading, down and rose to greet him.

"What is all the noise about, dear?" she asked, running toward her lover.

"We are leaving," Le Mans answered, looking deeply into her lovely eyes. "We are sailing under sealed orders and our destination is yet unknown."

"Sealed orders?" she raised her eyebrows. "What does that mean?"

"We shall not know our destination until we are thirty miles out to sea," he explained. "My superior officer gave me a sealed envelope which I am on honor bound not to open until we have covered the required distance, which in this case is thirty miles."

"Ah, I see." She gave him a long searching glance. "You look worried, dear," she said softly. "Why?"

"You are mistaken, sweetheart," Le Mans lied tactfully. "I am not at all worried. In fact, I am glad we are going to move. Action is what my men have been crying for. Well, they have it and plenty of it."

"Do you think there will be any danger?" Ruth

took a strangle hold on his arm.

"Perhaps. We must be prepared for every possibility, my dear. If we should happen to meet an English cruiser, you may rest assured that there will be a fight."

"Of course, you'll win," she said not quite sure of her voice.

"We'll win or die in the attempt," Le Mans answered firmly.

She gave a shudder and put her arms around his neck.

"No matter what happens, we will share the same fate, my lover," she murmured. "Death has no terrors for me when facing it with you. Even death could not kill a love like mine."

"You are a brave and noble woman," he cried, crushing her to his bosom with a sudden passion.

"Ah, I am happy to hear you say that." Ruth clung to him with all her strength. "And even though I am not your wife, I'll fight with you and die with you if it must be."

For a long moment neither spoke. Their lips hung on to each other in blissful silence.

"Ruth," he said at last, and very gently. "Perhaps I have been an unprincipled scoundrel in my conduct toward you. But I give you my solemn promise that I will make you my wife if we both survive this trip.

"I want to tell you this now, I love you with all my heart and soul. I couldn't love you more if you were my wife in the sight of heaven. That is something I have never said to any other woman."

"Oh, you dear, dear man," she hugged him frantically. "The day when you make me your wife, will the happiest of my life. Of course, I am happy now, but to be your wife? Ah, it seems too good to come true."

For another minute or two they held each other in

close embrace, then Captain Le Mans disengaged himself gently.

He forced her to sit on a chair, while he remained standing before her. For some little time he hesitated.

What he was about to do was no easy task.

With a slow, deliberate motion he reached into his hip pocket and brought out a loaded automatic gun.

"I want you to keep this," he said, laying the weapon on the table, "there is not one among us who would not prefer death to being taken a prisoner. And I could not die peacefully knowing you a prisoner in the hands of the English. That is why I am leaving you the gun."

Ruth snatched the weapon up and pressed it to her heart.

"Don't worry on that score for a single second," she cried vehemently. "I swear by my love for you that the English will never take me alive. Does that satisfy you?"

"Entirely," he stooped and touched her forehead with his lips.

"One more thing," he went on presently. "Do not become alarmed in case you hear shots fired. You are quite safe in this cabin. It is entirely encased with steel so heavy that no shell can penetrate it. Don't leave the room unless I myself come for you. Will you promise that?"

"I promise." Ruth held up her right hand as if making an oath. "And," she added, her voice pitifully small, "if—if the worst should happen, you'll come for me, won't you?"

"You know I will, dearest of women," was the fervent response.

Captain Le Mans kissed her once more, then hurriedly left the cabin without looking back.

After locking the door carefully he proceeded on deck. Volumes of black smoke rolled heavily from the four funnets of the cruiser. They were blown toward the low-lying shore.

There was a flurry in the water astern and the ship commenced to move slowly into the stormy gray of morning.

As Le Mans broke the big envelope which contained the sealed order he was surprised to learn that he was to head straight for Liverpool. This seemed to indicate that the location of the steamer he usually met, had been changed.

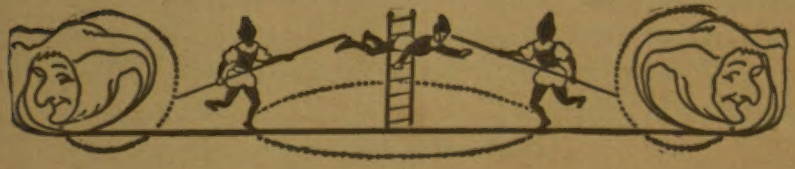
He did not leave the bridge for a moment. With his binoculars pressed to his eyes, he scanned the distant horizon. It was a beautiful moonlight night with myriads of twinkling stars overhead.

They passed through Cardigan Bay without sighting a ship. Then, suddenly, a gasp escaped his lips.

To the left, perhaps three thousand yards, he noticed a cloud of smoke. He strained his eyes to find the cause of this smoke. Finally he made out the long, low lines of an English cruiser.

With a few quick steps he was at the telephone that connected the bridge with the engine room.

"Crowd on all the steam you can," he shouted. "We are seen." To the pilot he said: "Hard aport and keep going. No matter what happens, we must not stop."



Chapter 130

PRISONERS

WHAT Captain Le Mans expected was not long in coming. There was a sudden detonation, and a shell came screaming across the prow of his ship. This was the signal to stop. But similar warnings had been given on previous occasions without being heeded.

He felt confident that his swift liner could evade the English cruiser. Another shell followed the first one. It exploded about fifteen yards to the left.

"Damn them!" Le Mans muttered. "That was a close one."

The next instant he was at the hidden turret, giving an order to the men clustered about the two ten inch guns.

A lurid flame of fire shot from the muzzles of both guns. The two crashes were simultaneous. Captain Le Mans watched the shells explode wide of the mark. And neither of them served to halt the English cruiser.

On and on it came, firing intermittently.

Disaster began to stare the Frenchman in the face. He saw it and shuddered.

His thoughts were of the helpless young woman who was hidden in his cabin. Ah, how she must love him to share this peril. And how he wished he had not granted her wish to come along.

"Poor impetuous girl," he murmured. "Why did you not stay at home?"

Continued in next number

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